

You never know who will walk through the door

by Candace Ward



A younger Jerry Deppa builds Finger Lakes Cabin on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in 1965—over 50 years ago.

You never know who will walk through the door at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center. I had the pleasure in late January of meeting Jerry Deppa, who came from his home in Sitka to visit friends on the Kenai Peninsula and renew his connection with the Refuge after being away for 50 years.

He wanted to take a hike to visit the Finger Lakes Cabin in the Refuge. I had to sadly tell him that it had burned down in 2003. He proceeded to tell me that he had built the cabin in 1965—51 years ago! He shared how he had cut 50 spruce trees in a small upland bowl on the east side of the Finger Lakes with hand saw and ax. He skidded the trees manually to the cabin site and built the cabin with a black spruce pole and sod roof. The cabin was a research site for field studies on spruce grouse with ADF&G Biologist Larry Ellison. Findings from the study were incorporated into the Alaska Department of Fish & Game Wildlife Notebook Series which can be found to this day at the following website—[http://www.adfg.alaska.](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=educators.notebookseries)

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As we continued to talk he also shared his Dall sheep hunting adventures in the Caribou Hills and Tustumena Glacier country. His most amazing story is a horse pack trip in the fall of 1966 with his saddle horse Jigs and pack horse Dora Day. He started out following the survey tape flagging of the “new” Funny River Horse Trail pioneered by then Refuge Manager, Will Troyer. Much of the trail was through boggy country and without Jigs, who moved like an acrobat stepping carefully on the tops of sphagnum moss hummocks, he never would have made it to the uplands of Caribou Hills.

He set up his base camp in the rain at the edge of fresh snow blanketing the steep rocky slopes, so he had pasture available for his horses. Each day he headed up to higher country in search of Dall sheep rams. He and the horses worked their way into the peaks and he often spotted bands of rams far off in the distance. With much of the high country covered in

low, dense clouds and frequently snowing, white-out conditions made getting close to the rams impossible.

On one of his hunting days he stayed out too late and, caught out in steep terrain with failing light and blowing snow, he had to rely on Jigs to find the route back to camp maneuvering narrow sheep trails in the dark. In fact, Jigs amazingly made a dead stop right next to Jerry's wet tent not even tripping on the guy lines in the complete darkness. Jerry said "you could always rely on Jigs to get you home."

Talking to Jerry in more depth, he shared that professionally he is a locksmith and for fun he is a volunteer for Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges on St. Lazaria Island west of Sitka. For the last four years he has helped to support the seabird research operations of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. In fact, it turned out that my good friend and retired colleague, Poppy Benson, had worked with him on St. Lazaria.

He did go for a hike out to the Finger Lakes cabin site to show his friend, Amanda Millay. He just happened to run into retired Refuge Ranger Gary Titus on the trail. They were able to share stories about the

Refuge and Finger Lakes Cabin. I am always surprised that in the vastness of Alaska and the Kenai Peninsula, you often connect with people who know people that you know—it's a small place in that regard.

I definitely was inspired by Jerry's love of the outdoors and wildlife, adventurous spirit and lifelong connection to wildlife research. I also thought it was wonderful for him to return to the Kenai after half a century to revisit his special places.

Do you have a special story or remembrance to share about how the Refuge has affected your life? We are gathering Refuge stories in honor of the Refuge's 75th Birthday and hope to share them in a variety of ways—in articles like this one, at live events, on our website and through Facebook. Please get in touch with me and share your story.

Candace Ward is a park ranger who has worked in the Refuge's Visitor Services Program for over 30 years. If you would like to share a special Refuge adventure story, please contact her at 907-260-2807 or e-mail at candace_ward@fws.gov. Find more about the Refuge at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.



Jerry Deppa, now a Friend of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, volunteers his time helping with research on St. Lazaria Island in Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.